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7 March 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

Subject: Certain Considerations Respecting the Death of Stalin

There is no need to stress the risks that the US would incur by taking precipitate action with respect to the death of Stalin and the related repositioning of the Soviet ruling clique. This point will be fully covered by the pending IAC estimate (SE-39).

I am less confident that the IAC will highlight sufficiently the risks attendant upon inaction by the US with respect to these events. My personal views are as follows:

Our estimate as to the power balance between the US and the USSR as of this date can be given with much more confidence than any attempt to project that power balance into the future -- even over the short range, say to 1955. As of today, we can say with some confidence that the US is stronger than the USSR and would be victorious if war broke out tomorrow. The US margin of superiority depends primarily upon (a) its atomic stockpile, (b) {its strategic Air Force, and (c) its broad economic base.

A second point which is more debatable, but which to my mind is equally clear, is that the power position of the USSR vis-a-vis

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the US has been impaired by the death of Stalin. It is, of course, entirely possible that the present rulers of the Soviet Union will be able to continue their dictatorial rule at home and abroad, but their capability to do so without falling out remains to be proved. The loss of Stalin -- the symbol and the man -- cannot be glossed over as inconsequential.

As respects our estimates on the future power position of the US vs. the USSR, they all seem to possess one common feature: we can not state with any assurance that the US will be able to maintain its present margin of superiority. There may well be a saturation point with respect to our atomic superiority -- particularly if and when the USSR solves the secret of the hydrogen bomb. The development of the Soviet Long-Range Air Force will not have to surpass or even equal our own Strategic Air Force in order to pose a threat of critical nature to the continental US. The relative build-up of the Soviet and Soviet-bloc economies must be weighed in the light of the USSR's willingness to devote much higher percentages of its total production to direct and indirect military end uses.

Under these circumstances, US policy makers should weigh carefully the grave risks inherent in permitting the new rulers of the Soviet Union to consolidate their position without some affirmative attempt on the part of the US to use the existing situation as an occasion to "negotiate from strength".

One can not "negotiate from strength" without risk, unless one has an overwhelming superiority in war-making potential. I am aware

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of no US program having as its objective the establishment of such superiority on the part of the US and its allies. Indeed, it is debatable whether current programs of the US and its allies are sufficient to maintain our present margin of superiority.

If this is so, there is no riskless course of action open to us. Moreover, the course of action carrying the least immediate risk (namely, taking no affirmative action at this time with respect to the USSR) may well be the most dangerous as respects the ultimate security of the US (if it permits the USSR to wipe out, or even to reverse, the US's margin of superiority).

Perhaps the strongest argument supporting the view that the US should refrain from affirmative steps with respect to the USSR during the next few months is that, if left to themselves, the Soviet ruling clique will fall out and Soviet imperialism will suffer an internal collapse. With respect to this proposition it should be noted that the entire history of the Soviet Union contradicts it. In 1919, in the 1930s, in the 1940s, and, generally since the Soviet seizure of power -- as today -- there has been a large body of opinion which held to the view that Soviet power would disappear through internal collapse. Despite this substantial body of opinion, the military and economic power of the USSR is higher than ever before.

The real question for decision by the policy makers is whether the risk inherent in basing our policy upon this outworn expectation of the dissolution of the Soviet Empire outweighs the risk of affirmative action by the US at a time when it possesses a distinct

margin of power superiority over the USSR. By "affirmative action" is not meant the application of military power, but rather the insistence upon the negotiation of outstanding differences with an implied or expressed threat to employ that superior power if our reasonable demands are not met.

It is not the function of this memorandum to suggest the particular types of affirmative action which might be taken by the US at this time. The function of intelligence is limited to pointing out that a failure to evolve such courses of action may constitute a failure to seize the "last clear chance" to avoid a war with the USSR in which the US can not be assured of prevailing.

With respect to the foregoing it should also be noted that a solution to the problem of transfer of power in the Soviet Union by the ruling clique will have a major psychological impact upon world opinion. It has so often been said that the major test of the Soviet system would be its ability to survive the loss of Stalin, that a demonstration of such ability may well be accepted by important segments of the world as a final demonstration of Soviet invincibility. ✓

LOFTUS E. BECKER

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FORM 30-4  
SEP. 1947

16-63704-1 U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE